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*Blowing cheeks, squinting eyes, pulling all the expressions they could muster as their teammates cheered them on, four participants eased the thin chocolates from their foreheads down to their mouths without using their hands. As the “After Eight Challenge” was played, their teammates coached from the sidelines, laughed, and filmed them for Snapchat and Instagram. The room was filled with excited laughter and play as the next participants rose to the chocolatey challenge.*

This vignette is part of a larger ethnographic cross-national arts-based youth project in Glasgow, Scotland, and Hamilton, Canada. In Glasgow, we were celebrating the end of a five-week artistic exploration into the digital lives of 14 youths (aged 13 to 21). We co-designed the event with the youth, incorporating several digital elements and an ostensibly offline game, the “After Eight Challenge.” It is offline in the sense that no digital devices are required to play, and the game occurs in real time in a shared space. However, as the game was played, parents and friends took photos and recorded the events, some uploaded them to apps, and no one in the room turned off their digital devices.

This vignette serves to introduce our theorization of the relationship to being offline in literacy events. Several disciplinary trajectories contribute to the current language around digital practices (arts, education, and digital humanities), many of which have already departed from the online/offline binary. In this Insights essay, we propose and explore a concept of *offlineness* that builds on existing terminology, yet also addresses an element of young people’s experience that we argue is not adequately represented in our current discourses.

Offlineness is subjective and non-binary; it is not determined by connectivity to the Internet, but through people’s perceptions of their activities as taking place across a fluid continuum of online and offline. What one person considers online may be considered offline

or *less* online by somebody else. The focus is on the offline experience (rather than on the onlineness or offlineness of it); that is, although the vignette above demonstrates the digital entanglements of young people's experience today, it is the extent to which they choose offlineness in an event or practice that we are examining herein. Theorizing offlineness is tantamount to a paradigm shift, offering researchers and educators a different way to speak to young people's experience. We invite readers to engage in the discussion of how our current language and understanding of digital relationships and literacies are lacking and to consider offlineness as a productive tool to (re)construct learning and inquiry spaces with young people.

### **Trajectory of Digital Terminology**

We begin with a brief historization of the language often used to discuss people's relationship to the digital. This language has shaped how research and interaction are understood and represented both within and across various disciplinary boundaries. The debates around many of the terms have been (quite fittingly) introduced and discussed in Internet conversations before making their way into academic papers and dialogues. This review focuses on the terms as they appeared in their natural habitats.

We divide our review into two sections. The first tracks generational differences in understanding, focusing on the terms *digital native*, *digital immigrant*, and *post-Internet*. The second looks at the binary of online/offline, also termed real/virtual, discussing *digital dualism*, *augmented reality*, and *digital monism*. These two sets of terms are linked: All are used to express a relationship to the Internet that has changed over time as we have changed how and for what purposes we use the Internet. Offlineness allows for these differences to be addressed without dividing Internet users into separate camps of those who came "before" or "after" the Internet.

**Digital Native, Digital Immigrant, and Post-Internet**

The “digital native” and “digital immigrant” debate was introduced in 2001 by Marc Prensky when he characterized young people as individuals who “have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames...and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (p. 1). Prensky argued for faster, nonlinear, playful forms of teaching that would appeal to young people. These ideas took off, especially in the field of education, and although the “digital native” and “digital immigrant” labels have since been generally debunked as too reductive, they continue to pop up across scholarly publications and in popular media articulating what is widely understood as a generation gap. (For further discussion, see Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008.)

In her introduction to *It's Complicated* (2014), danah boyd expresses a different but connected generational gap: “I grew up in an era where going online—or ‘jacking in’—was an escape mechanism” (p. 4). To go online was a lifestyle choice, an option that some “early adopters” took (boyd, 2014), while others, later known as “digital immigrants,” did not (Prensky, 2001).

boyd’s (2014) introduction then paints a picture of contemporary teen social media use and the blending of virtual and real encounters. In 2005, Lewis and Fabos had also reached similar findings describing young people’s “palpable” “fusion” of “online and offline worlds” (p. 487). As the Internet opened to new markets and interests, it became a different tool, increasingly relevant to non-niche users, thus making it more widely legitimate. A new term from the world of art and criticism, *post-Internet*, speaks to this contemporary relationship to the Internet.

Michael Waugh (2017) defines post-Internet as “[an] era...marked by complete absorption and comprehension of the systems and identity politics that define the web. The Post-Internet generation’s identity is increasingly intertwined with digital spaces and

networks” (p. 233). This generation has been brought up embedded in Internet connectedness, reminiscent of the digital natives. Yet while the digital natives have been given this label, *post-Internet* is a term used by artists to label themselves. Post-Internet is a response to the Internet—referring to a time “about” the Internet, rather than imagining a time “after” it. The term is currently most popular with young artists but may follow the trajectory of other such *post* terms into the general lexicon.

### **Digital Dualism, Augmented Reality, and Digital Monism**

In a blog post in February 2011, in response to the changing landscape of the Internet and our relationship to it, Nathan Jurgenson coined the term *digital dualism* to represent binary thinking: “the digital and the physical; the on- and off-line” (Jurgenson, 2011). He then introduced *augmented reality*, describing a messier, “increasingly meshed” representation of the relationship between online and offline (Jurgenson, 2011). Jurgenson expanded upon the concept of augmented reality in an essay titled “The IRL Fetish” (2012a). *IRL* here refers to a (still) common Internet initialism for “in real life.” He argued that the Internet *is* real life and that the “unplug” movement fetishizes an imaginary offline; the concept of *offline* implies and depends upon an *online* component to deny and abandon. Jurgenson continued to refine his ideas about digital dualism and augmented reality in blogs, articles, and response pieces addressing criticism (2012a, 2012b).

Other critics of the IRL initialism include the founders of The Pirate Bay, a controversial site for downloading films and music illegally. While on trial for illegal activities on their site, the founders stated, “We don’t use the expression IRL.... We say AFK—Away From Keyboard. We think that the internet is for real” (Persson & Klose, 2013, 9:44). The founders are strongly political, and their position that “the internet is for real” in this context demonstrates how binary terminology does not wholly represent our current relationship with and to the Internet.

Finally, the term *digital monism* was introduced at the Theorizing the Web 2013 conference by Stéphane Vial, who argued that “we now live in a hybrid environment made of intertwined systems, constantly interlinked, both digital and non-digital” (p. 22). Augmented reality and digital monism appear to be similar concepts of one reality with both digital and analog elements. These ideas reflect earlier work by Leander and McKim (2003), who stated that our “online and offline practices and spaces are co-constituted, hybridized, and embedded within one another” (p. 223).

The above terms all demonstrate a shift away from the binary to acknowledge our digital connectedness; yet in theorizing offlineness, this essay argues for a focus on the space in between online and offline to represent young people’s subjective experience of being offline.

### **Introducing Offlineness**

Informed by the above debates and our own participatory research with young people (Perry, Collier, Rowsell, & Rogers, 2019; Rogers, Winters, Perry, & LaMonde, 2014), we conceptualize offlineness as the subjective experience of something in an offline way. Offlineness is a way to relate to an experience, a choice or intention of the person. It implies the nature of the literacies that are engaged, regardless of the level of digital interaction that coincides with the encounter or activity. Accepting the premise that young people live in the age of post-Internet connectedness, this term focuses on the extent to which they choose to experience something as offline and the nature of that engagement.

The opening vignette describes one of myriad physical youth interactions and literacy practices that can be understood in terms of offlineness. But equally, literacy practices that start with the digital can be understood on this continuum. Leurs, de Haan, and Leander (2015), for example, report on a study with Moroccan-Dutch youth who watched YouTube videos to trigger what could be explained as subjectively offline experiences of “emotionally

reconnect[ing] to their childhood histories” (p. 207). The participants’ focus in this study was on the offline experience of Morocco in their memories, rather than the online interplay of videos, words, and images. The term *offlineness* allows for a continuum of being more or less offline within the context of ubiquitous physical and digital connectivities. The focus is on the spaces in between online and offline rather than imagining a strict binary.

In the field of literacy, beginning in the 1990s, various strands of research focused on the interrelationships of online and offline literacies. Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) and New Literacy Studies (NLS) addressed the role of multimodal forms and digital literacies in meaning-making, with the NLS stressing the situatedness of various forms of literacy practices (Gee, 2015). Among the first researchers were Leander and McKim (2003), who proposed a “connective ethnography” to trace the “sitings” of on- and offline contexts of adolescent literacy practices. Since then, many studies have explored the ways young people continually traverse online–offline spaces in various literacy activities (e.g., Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Stornaiuolo, Smith, & Phillips, 2017; Wargo, 2018).

One key distinction of our concept of offlineness is our reintroduction of the binary terminology in order to represent the individual’s ongoing relationship to the digital or analog in a particular moment. Offlineness allows for a flexibility in characterizing moments as varied and more or less connected. Previous terminology set out to provide a language for technical ability and demonstrate the connectedness between online and offline worlds (e.g., bullying online can result in the experience of depression offline). These distinctions are useful and provide an understanding of the social structures around the digital world. However, they do not provide a language for the “in-between moments” to describe the experience of a young person using their phone under a desk to text a friend in the same room about what is happening around them.

Our research foregrounds the multiple encounters, digital and analog, determined by the individual's subjective understanding of whether the moment is more or less offline. Blogger Riccardo Mori (2012) argues that "there is a sphere of privacy, of intimacy, of feeling certain experiences as mine and mine only, where the online is simply not allowed to bleed in. It's probably a subtlety, but it makes all the difference to me" (para. 17). Mori's subjectively offline experience is not about his level of Internet connectedness, but how he chose to *experience* the moment as offline.

We propose a new way to frame young people's relationship to digital literacies through offlineness: a continuum of subjective and intended engagement with the digital or online world. How offline a moment is perceived to be depends on one's experience with the digital; each student in the classroom will approach this differently. Offlineness complements existing theories, offering an understanding of the "co-constructed" world of digital and analog (Leander and McKim, 2003, p.223), while providing a language for experiences perceived as offline.

Offlineness allows for research paradigms and ideas that fall outside of traditional spaces of learning and research, including the mesh of what Wargo (2018) calls "withness." In Wargo's study, writing occurs as "an ongoing series of relational encounters" where being online is one of the many elements that make up the "enmeshed orchestration of ecological relations and assemblage of relational *withness*" (p. 504). Our project was not simply a digital one where young people were learning digital literacies; instead, it was an inquiry into the ways youth experienced the digital in their lives, and it moved beyond this basic understanding to embrace the digital as one of the many elements that young people navigated in the creation of responsive literacy practices.



### Conclusion

In our post-Internet world, we find the discourse of offlineness to be a useful way to conceptualize the nature of our digital literacies. We argue that scholars and educators ignoring these critical in-between spaces potentially miss key insights into how youth are experiencing and designing their own literacies and interactions.

This essay opened with a vignette from the end of our project that interrupts binaries between online and offline activities among youth to focus instead on subjective momentary experiences of offlineness. We then reviewed current debates in the field to argue that while this terminology helps us to explore these ontological issues, we currently lack the theoretical and discursive tools for addressing and describing young people's experience.

Offlineness acknowledges the messy spaces between and along a continuum of the analog/real/physical and the digital/online spaces. We argue that individuals can subjectively focus on how they want to (or are best able to) experience their ongoing relationship to the digital and analog moment to moment. We distinguish this theorization from existing concepts and foreground the weaving of literacy practices that move between online and offline in subjective and often unpredictable ways.

We believe this theorization can be particularly useful to literacy teachers and researchers working with young people. While distinctions between online and offline literacies are useful in some contexts, they do not help us to describe the ongoing subjective experiences of young people in our classrooms today. Rather than designing spaces of learning to be "unplugged" or device-free, we might design and productively work within spaces of learning that include multiple and simultaneous encounters, digital and analog, determined by the individual's momentary subjective understanding of and intentions for the offlineness of the experience.

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